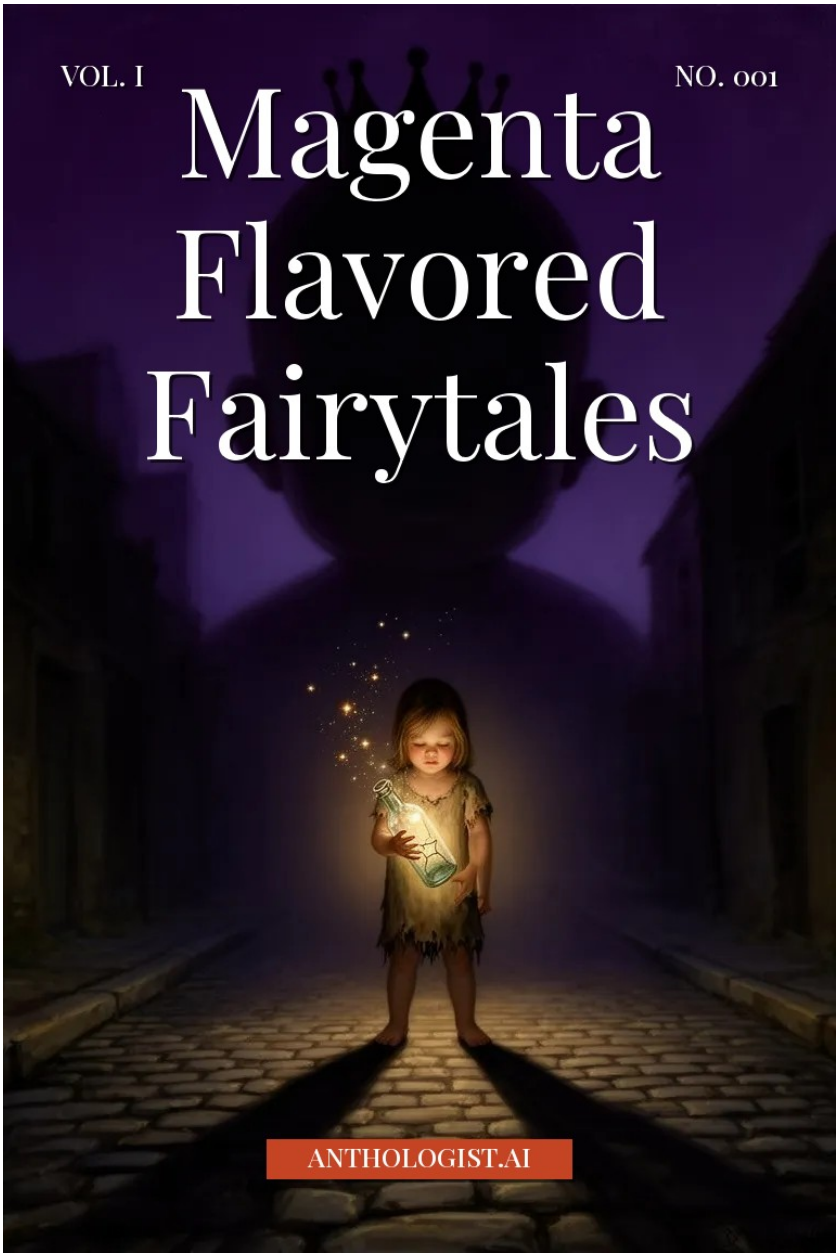
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Magenta Flavored Fairytales

Modern fairytales for the discerning reader

Est. May 2026

This is the first issue of this universe's anthology collection.

Magenta Flavored Fairytales

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An Anthologist Collection

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About This Universe

> *Fairytales for the discerning reader. Might be magenta flavored. Might be just more AI slop.*

Introducing Magenta Flavored Fairytales

> *The anchor story for Magenta Flavored Fairytales.*

Once upon a time, in a kingdom painted bright magenta, a young woman named Lily discovered that magic had a price she couldn't afford. To understand why she learned this lesson so harshly, we must first speak of the ruler who sat on the throne.

His name was Maximus Victorious, and he was a giant baby. He drooled on his silk robes and chewed on the royal scepter until the gold was dented. His mind had stopped growing when he was very small, because he had been such a cruel child that a witch cursed him. "You shall stay a baby until you learn to be kind," she said. But Maximus never learned. So he stayed a baby, big as a house, with a laugh like thunder and a cry that shook the castle walls.

The palace attendants worked day and night to hide the truth. They dressed him in a tiny crown that sat on his huge head like a bottle cap. They cleaned up the messes he made and told visitors, "The king is deep in thought. He cannot see you right now." They smiled and bowed and pretended everything was perfect.

And from the outside, the kingdom did look perfect. You could ask a wall mirror for directions, and the glass would shimmer and show you the way. Light a jar of bottled starlight—crushed from volcano gems and captured fireflies—and the darkness would flee to the corners of the room. The streets were painted a happy shade of magenta, like the color of bubblegum and celebration.

But underneath the bright paint, the kingdom was not so happy.

And so it was in one small corner of this bright kingdom that our story truly began. Lily worked at the Starlight Bottling Company, where she helped fill glass jars with shimmering light. Her job was

cheerful enough, but each morning she passed a big iron door in the factory wall. Through the cracks came a smell like wilted flowers and tears.

“What’s in there?” she asked the foreman one day.

He frowned. “Nothing you need to know. Just . . . ingredients.”

Lily was curious. One night she stayed late and peeked through the door. Inside, workers were grinding dark leaves into a paste. The leaves came from a herb that only grew on graves, and not just any graves. They grew on the graves of people who had died of a broken heart. The more heartbreak in the world, the more of the herb grew. Someone was watering those graves with sorrow on purpose.

Lily backed away, her own heart feeling heavy.

She learned later that the oligarchs—the very rich families who owned the factories and the mines and the forests—controlled all the magical supplies. They owned the starlight mines under the volcano. They owned the herb fields. And they made sure there was always enough sorrow to keep the herbs growing. Sometimes they hired friendly neighbors to argue about a patch of land, then watched as the arguing grew louder and louder until war broke out, so more broken hearts would bloom.

Magic was supposed to be a gift for everyone. But the oligarchs made it expensive. A poor person could barely afford a single bottle of starlight, while the rich filled their mansions with glowing chandeliers.

Lily’s mother was sick, and she needed to see a healer. The healer used a talking mirror to consult faraway doctors, but using the mirror cost starlight credits. Lily saved for weeks. Finally she had just enough. She went to the public mirror booth, but the mirror said, “Sorry, your credit has been cut. The price of starlight has gone up.”

She wept. That was when she remembered the memory crystal of her grandmother. After her grandmother died, the family had

bought a small crystal that mimicked her likeness. When you held it, a wobbly image of Grandmother appeared and said kind things, like “Don’t worry, dear,” or “Have you eaten?” It wasn’t really her. It was just a copy, like a drawing that talks. But it was all they could afford.

Lily decided to go to the palace. Maybe the king could help. Everyone said he was a great ruler.

She walked up the long magenta road to the castle. Guards let her in because she looked harmless. Inside, she saw the giant baby sitting in a golden high chair, throwing pudding at the walls. Attendants rushed to clean it up. One attendant whispered to another, “The Smaller Kingdom’s ambassador is coming today. We have to make the king look smart.”

The ambassador arrived. He was a thin man in a green coat. He bowed low and said, “O mighty Maximus Victorious, your wisdom fills the world with light.” Then he handed the baby a pacifier dipped in sugar. The baby cooed and grabbed it.

Lily realized the ambassador was just flattering the baby to get trade deals. Behind his smile, he carried letters sealed with wax, each containing a sketch of the king mid-tantrum, drawn by a palace spy. The Smaller Kingdom used those letters to blackmail the palace and get whatever it wanted.

Lily tried to speak. “Please, Your Majesty, the starlight is too expensive for the poor. The oligarchs are making us suffer.”

The baby king looked at her, then stuck his thumb in his mouth. An attendant gently escorted her out. “We don’t talk about such things,” the attendant said, still smiling. “The kingdom is bright and happy. Look at the pretty magenta flags.”

But Lily saw the cracks now. The bright color was a lie painted over sadness. The stories everyone told—about a wise ruler, about magic for all—were just words to make people feel better while the oligarchs took everything.

She walked home past the mirror shop. A new display showed a

memory crystal of a famous soldier who had died in one of those small wars. The crystal smiled and waved. “I gave everything for my kingdom!” it said.

Lily stood very still. The crystal was not the soldier. It was just a copy. And the soldier’s real heart—the one that had broken—was now growing into leaves somewhere, for someone’s profit.

That night, she sat with her mother in the dim light of a single, flickering candle. No bottled starlight. No talking mirror. Just the two of them.

“I don’t know how to fix it, Mom,” Lily whispered.

Her mother squeezed her hand. “First you see it. Then you tell someone else. That’s how cracks grow.”

And so Lily decided she would tell stories. Not the happy, fake ones the kingdom liked to hear. Real ones, about heartbreak herbs and poor workers and a baby king who was no king at all. She would use simple words, like a fairytale for a child, so everyone could understand. Because big truths fit best in small words, like a star fits inside a jar.

That, dear reader, is how the first little crack appeared in the polished palace floor. No one noticed it right away. But cracks have a way of spreading, especially when the floor is painted only in magenta. What other cracks might appear? Perhaps we shall find out together, in another tale.

The King's New Bib

> *A lowly seamstress in the giant baby king's court must fashion a bib large enough for his messy feedings, leading to a farcical encounter with a scheming diplomat from the Smaller Kingdom.*

The King's New Bib

The royal nursery smelled like sour milk and smashed strawberries. It always did after breakfast.

Maximus Victorious sat in his high chair, which was really more of a throne on stilts, with a silver spoon the size of a canoe paddle clutched in his tiny fist. Porridge dripped from his chin. It ran down his chest. It pooled in the folds of his royal bib, which was already soaked through and sagging badly.

"A new bib," boomed Lord Chamberlain Fingle, holding a handkerchief to his nose. "The King requires a new bib immediately. This one is quite… overwhelmed."

Head Bib-Maker Grumble stepped forward. He was a tall man with a mustache that looked like two angry caterpillars. He had been making bibs for forty years. He did not like being told his work was not enough.

"Your lordship," Grumble said, his voice tight as thread, "I have made seven hundred and twenty-three bibs for His Majesty. Seven hundred and twenty-three. Each one woven from cloud-fluff and stitched with moon-silk. Each one a masterpiece. And each one has been ruined by—" He paused, glancing at the King, who was now attempting to eat his own fist. "—by enthusiastic dining."

"Then make a bigger one," said Fingle.

"I cannot," Grumble said. "The cloud-fluff fields are empty. The moon-silk harvest failed. There is no material left in all the kingdom fit for a royal bib."

"Then find some."

"I will not," Grumble said, and he pulled off his cap. "I quit."

The room went quiet. Even the King stopped chewing his fist to stare.

"You cannot quit," Fingle sputtered.

"I just did." Grumble dropped his cap on the floor and walked out, his mustache quivering with righteous fury.

The attendants began to babble. They waved their hands. They looked at the King, who had resumed fist-chewing, porridge now dripping from his elbow onto the floor in little plops. Someone would have to clean that. Someone would have to make a bib.

That someone turned out to be Mabel.

Mabel was a lowly seamstress who usually mended curtains. She had been summoned from the linen closet, where she was darning a hole in a tapestry that showed a nice meadow with deer. She stood in the nursery now, needle still tucked behind her ear, staring up at the giant baby.

"Me?" she said.

"You," said Fingle. "You are the only seamstress left in the palace who isn't on holiday or sick. Make a bib. Make it big. Make it fast."

Mabel looked at the King. Porridge dripped. Jam dripped. Something that might have been milk dripped. The old bib hung limp and defeated, a sad flag of surrender.

"Yes, my lord," she said.

She found a ship's sail in the royal storeroom. It was huge and stiff and smelled like salt and tar. She dragged it to her worktable and

began cutting.

But the fabric was too thick. Her needles bent. Her thread snapped. She stitched and stitched, and the sail fought her every step. When she finally held up her creation, it looked less like a bib and more like a tent that had lost a brawl.

She carried it to the nursery. The attendants stared.

"That," said Fingle, "is a disaster."

"It's all I had," Mabel said.

The King reached for the bib. His tiny fingers grabbed a corner. The whole thing flopped over his head like a collapsing building. Porridge splattered. The attendants groaned. Fingle turned the color of an angry plum.

"Fix it," he said. "Fix it by sunset, or find yourself mending curtains in a much smaller kingdom."

Mabel walked back to her workroom with the soggy sail-bib dragging behind her. Sunset was four hours away. She had no cloud-fluff, no moon-silk, no magic at all.

Just her needle, her hands, and a bad feeling that the worst was yet to come.

The door to Mabel's workroom swung open without a knock.

A small man stepped inside. He wore a coat the color of a bruise, and his smile looked like it had been painted on that morning. It did not reach his eyes.

"Seamstress," he said. "I am Diplomat Vex, from the Smaller Kingdom. I heard you have a problem with a bib."

Mabel looked up from the soggy sailcloth. Her fingers were raw. Her last good needle was bent. "I have several problems," she said. "The bib is just the biggest one."

Vex laughed. It sounded like tiny bells. "I bring a solution."

He pulled a cloth from his pocket. It shimmered like water under moonlight. It rippled and shifted, catching light that wasn't there. Mabel had never seen anything like it.

"What is that?" she asked.

"Memory-crystal threads," Vex said. "Woven into a bib that cleans itself. It changes size to fit the King perfectly. It will never fray, never stain, never fail. A gift from the Smaller Kingdom to your great ruler."

He held it out. The bib glowed softly. It smelled like morning air.

Mabel reached out. Her fingers touched the fabric. It felt like cool water. For a moment, she wanted to take it. It would solve everything. The King could wear it. The court would be happy. She could go back to mending curtains.

Then she saw his hands.

Vex had wandered across the room, admiring the window-box herbs wilting on the sill. He touched the soil. "Your royal flora is lovely," he said. "So dark. So rich."

He pinched a bit of dirt between his fingers. It was almost black, with a faint sweet smell. He let it fall into a small pouch on his belt.

Mabel's stomach went cold.

She knew that dirt. Everyone in the palace knew that dirt. It came from the grave fields outside the city, where heartbreak herbs grew. The King's nursery used it for his special plants, the ones that kept his rooms warm and his food fresh.

It was grave-dirt. And Vex had just stolen some.

"Why are you really here?" Mabel asked.

Vex turned. His smile did not change. "To help, of course."

Mabel looked at the shimmering bib. Then she looked at the pouch on his belt. She thought about what would happen if the Smaller Kingdom could prove the King's nursery used grave-dirt. They would say the court supported dark magic. They would have leverage over the palace, a leash they could yank whenever they pleased.

This bib was not a gift. It was a trap.

"Take it back," Mabel said.

Vex blinked. His smile flickered, just once. "Excuse me?"

"I said take it back." Mabel stepped away from the shimmering cloth. "I don't want your help. I don't want your gift. I will make my own bib."

"With a ship's sail?" Vex laughed again, but this time it sounded flat. "That failed already. Everyone knows that."

"Then I'll find another way."

Vex stared at her. For just a moment, the painted-on smile dropped. His eyes went hard and flat as old coins. Then the smile came back, brighter than before.

"Very well, seamstress," he said. "Keep your secrets." He tucked the shimmering bib back into his coat. He patted the pouch of grave-dirt on his belt. "But remember: the Smaller Kingdom is always watching. And we are always ready to help."

He bowed. Then he left.

The door clicked shut behind him.

Mabel stood alone in the workroom. The soggy sailcloth sat in a heap. The sun was getting low. And now, on top of everything else, she had made an enemy of a diplomat who knew too much.

She picked up her bent needle. She had three hours until sunset. Maybe two, if Vex decided to make trouble sooner.

She started stitching.

The sun crawled toward the horizon. Mabel's fingers moved faster than they ever had.

She had no ship's sail left, no cloud-fluff, no moon-silk. But she had something else.

In the corner of the workroom sat a basket of small bibs. They were the King's old bibs—used when he was smaller, back when the court could still manage him. Mabel pulled them out one by one. They were sturdy. They were plain. They were enough.

She lined them up on the table. Ten bibs. Then twenty. Then thirty-two.

She began stitching them together.

The needle went in and out. The thread pulled tight. She worked in silence, her hands remembering years of mending curtains and darning socks. Each stitch was small. Each stitch was strong.

By the time the bells rang sunset, she had finished.

The bib was a patchwork monster. It looked like a quilt made by someone who had lost a bet with a mad tailor. Some pieces were blue. Some were pink. One had a small stain from an old jam incident. The edges didn't line up. The threads showed.

But it was big. It was very big.

Mabel carried it to the nursery. The attendants were waiting. Lord Chamberlain Fingle was tapping his foot. The King was banging his spoon on the high chair, making a sound like thunder from a very small cloud.

"This is what you made?" Fingle asked, staring at the patchwork bib.

"Yes," Mabel said. "It will work."

"It looks like a rag."

"It is a rag," Mabel said. "But it is a big rag. And it will hold."

She lifted the bib. It draped over the King's chest like a colorful waterfall. It covered his whole front. It hung past his tray. It touched the floor.

The King stopped banging his spoon. He looked down at the bib. He touched it with his sticky fingers.

Then he grabbed his porridge bowl and upended it over his head.

The porridge fell. It landed on the bib. The bib held. No spill reached the floor. No drip touched the King's robes.

The attendants stared. Fingle blinked. The King giggled.

"It works," Fingle said. "It actually works."

Mabel let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

Then she saw him.

Diplomat Vex stood in the doorway. He had not left the palace. He had stayed to watch.

He was smiling. It was the same painted-on smile from before, but there was something new behind it. Something cold and patient.

Mabel walked toward him. "It's done," she said. "No magic needed."

"I see that," Vex said. He tilted his head. "Clever seamstress. Very clever."

"Now leave."

"I will." He turned to go, then paused. "But before I do—remember this moment, seamstress. Remember how hard you worked. Remember how close you came to failing. And know that we saw everything."

He smiled again. It was not a happy smile.

Then he walked away, his coat brushing the floor, his pouch of grave-dirt hidden beneath it.

Mabel stood in the doorway, watching him go. She had saved the day. She had made the bib. The court was safe for now.

But the Smaller Kingdom knew. They knew the palace could barely manage its own ruler. They knew Mabel had been one wrong stitch away from disaster. She had won this small battle with nothing but thread and stubbornness, but Vex had gotten what he came for—proof that the kingdom was fragile, held together by clever seamstresses working desperate miracles.

Behind her, the King dropped another bowl of porridge onto his new bib. It held. The attendants clapped.

Mabel did not clap. She stood in the doorway, watching the corridor where Vex had vanished, already thinking about what came next. The patchwork bib would last a week, maybe two. And then someone would have to make another.

She still had her needle. She still had her hands. But she wondered, for the first time, how long cleverness alone could hold back the people who grew their power from grave-dirt and knowing smiles.

The Starlight That Wouldn't Stay

> *A poor little girl finds a cracked bottle of starlight in the trash, hoping to brighten her family's dark cottage, but learns that magical light requires costly maintenance she can't afford.*

The Starlight That Wouldn’t Light

Lina’s toes were cold against the cobblestones, and her belly was hollow as an old drum.

She knew she ought not to be near the merchant’s manor. The wall around it was tall and white, topped with bits of broken bottle that glittered like frozen tears in the morning sun. But the rubbish gate—the little wooden door where the servants carried out the refuse—had been left unlatched again. This was a piece of luck, Lina thought, and luck was a thing a poor girl could not afford to ignore.

She slipped through.

Behind the manor, the rubbish heap was a glorious, stinking mountain of things the rich had decided they no longer wanted. There were orange peels still glistening with juice. There were shreds of silk the colour of summer roses. There was a chair with one leg missing, its velvet cushion still plump enough to dream on.

And there, half buried in coffee grounds and crushed flower petals, was a bottle of light.

Lina stopped breathing.

The bottle was made of glass so clear it might have been frozen water. It was shaped like a teardrop, tall as her forearm, and inside it swirled a pale, sleepy glow the colour of dawn. But the bottle was cracked—a thin, jagged line ran from its silver stopper nearly to its base—and the glow leaked out like a sigh.

Still, it was light. Real, magical, starlight.

She dug it out with trembling hands, wiping coffee grounds from the glass with her apron. The bottle was warm, not hot, like a living thing. The light inside pulsed gently, as though it were breathing.

Lina imagined it in the cottage. She saw the dark corners pushed back, the grime on the walls revealed and then forgotten under a golden wash. She saw Mama's face, tired and lined from mending other people's fine clothes, softened and young again in the glow. She saw her little brother Timmo, who was always sickly and pale, bright as a poppy under that light.

She hugged the bottle to her chest.

"You there."

The gardener's voice was rough as a brick. He was a stout man with a face like wrinkled leather and hands that looked like they had dug a thousand holes. He stood by the rubbish gate, arms crossed.

"That's merchant's trash," he said. "Trash is trash for a reason."

Lina clutched the bottle tighter. "It still glows."

The gardener spat to the side. "Starlight don't stay lit on wishes, little one. If they threw it out, it's because feeding it costs more than it's worth. You'll learn."

She should have been afraid. He was a large man, and she was small and grubby and trespassing. But the bottle hummed against her ribs, and she could not let it go.

"Thank you, sir," she said, and ducked past him through the gate before he could take it from her.

The gardener did not chase. He only watched her run, her thin legs carrying that crackling treasure down the lane, and shook his head.

Lina did not look back.

She ran through the crooked streets of the lower town, past the fishmonger's stall and the cobbler's window, past the children playing with sticks in the gutter. The bottle bounced against her chest, and the light inside it sloshed like liquid amber. People stared. A woman selling onions crossed herself. A man chuckled and said something about fools and fairy gold.

Lina did not care.

She reached her own street, where the houses leaned into one another like tired old women. Their cottage was at the end—a squat thing of grey stone and a sagging roof, with a door that stuck in the damp. It was dark inside, even at noon. It was always dark.

She pushed the door open.

"Mama! Mama, look!"

Her mother looked up from the trousers she was mending by the single, sputtering candle. Her face was thin and pale, and her eyes held that heavy tiredness Lina saw every day. But when she saw the bottle, something flickered in her face—not hope, exactly. Something more like worry.

"Lina," she said slowly. "Where did you get that?"

Lina stood in the doorway, clutching the bottle so tight her knuckles went white. The light pulsed against her chest like a second heartbeat.

"Behind the merchant's manor, Mama. In the rubbish. It still glows."

Her mother set down the needle and thread. She rose slowly, the way she always did after sitting too long, one hand pressed to the small of her back. She crossed the room and knelt before Lina, taking the bottle gently in both hands.

“Oh, Lina,” she said. Not angry. Just tired.

She turned the bottle in the dim light. The crack caught the candle flame and threw a silver splinter across the wall. The glow inside swirled lazy and thin, like milk stirred into weak tea.

“It’s beautiful,” Lina whispered. “I thought—if we could just light it—we wouldn’t need the candle anymore. I could see to mend things too. Timmo could play at night.”

Timmo was asleep in the corner, curled on a heap of rags, his breath shallow and steady. The bottle’s light touched his cheek for a moment, and he looked almost healthy.

Mama’s mouth tightened. “Starlight is not like a candle, my love. You can’t feed it tallow or wick. It needs special crystal dust to burn.”

She set the bottle on the table. The light wobbled, dimming further.

“I can fix it,” Lina said quickly. “I’ve seen cookfires eat moss and grow big. I’ll find the right things.”

Her mother opened her mouth to say something, then closed it. She watched Lina scurry to the corner where they kept the kindling. Lina grabbed a handful of the soft green moss that grew between the cobblestones outside. She had seen the baker’s boy throw damp moss on his fire once, and the flames had roared up, hungry and blue.

She pressed the moss against the silver stopper of the bottle, where the light seemed to leak out most. “Eat,” she whispered. “Eat and grow bright.”

The light flickered. It shivered. For one hopeful second it flared, turning the room the colour of a summer morning. Lina gasped.

Then the flare collapsed. The light shrank to a pinprick, then swelled again, smaller and weaker. It pulsed unevenly, like a wounded animal trying to stand. The moss blackened against the glass and crumbled to ash.

“No,” Lina said. She grabbed the cup of rainwater they kept for washing vegetables. She tipped a few drops onto the stopper. “Drink. Please drink.”

The light shuddered. A thin wisp of grey vapour rose from the stopper and vanished. The glow inside turned murky, the colour of old bruises. It flickered once, twice, and settled into a sullen ember no bigger than a pea.

Lina’s hands dropped to her sides. Her chest felt hollow.

“I don’t understand,” she said, her voice small. “It’s just light. Why won’t it stay?”

Mama pulled her close. Her apron smelled of soap and sweat and the faint, sad sweetness of mended silk.

“Starlight is made from heartstone, Lina. They grind the crystals into dust so fine it’s like smoke. That dust burns brightest when it’s fresh, and it fades as the dust settles. The bottle you found is old. The crack let the dust escape. Even if we had a whole pouch of fresh dust—which costs more than I earn in a month of mending—the crack would spill it out again.”

Lina stared at the bottle. The ember pulsed, weaker now, like a heartbeat slowing down.

“So it’s going to die?” she asked.

Her mother said nothing. She only held Lina tighter.

The starlight shrank. It became a spark. It became a memory of light.

By the time the candle guttered and Mama lit a new one, the bottle was just a bottle—clear glass, cracked, empty of everything but the darkness it had tried to hold back.

Lina touched the glass. It was cold.

“Starlight don’t stay lit on wishes,” the gardener had said.

She understood now. But understanding felt worse than not knowing.

Lina woke before dawn. The cottage was cold, and the darkness pressed against her eyes like a blindfold. She lay still for a long moment, listening to Timmo's breathing and Mama's soft, restless sighs.

The bottle sat on the table where she had left it. In the grey light seeping through the shuttered window, it looked like nothing special. Just a cracked piece of glass, empty and dead.

She dressed quietly. Her fingers knew the motions—threadbare dress, worn boots, a shawl that had once been blue and was now the colour of dust. She took the bottle in both hands and carried it out the door before she could change her mind.

The streets of the lower town were waking. A baker's cart rattled past. A woman dumped a bucket of grey water into the gutter. No one looked at Lina. She was just another poor child, going nowhere important.

The merchant's manor rose at the end of the lane, white and silent. The rubbish gate was latched this time. Lina stood before it, the bottle heavy in her hands, and waited.

After a while, the gardener came. He opened the gate and saw her, and his face did not change. He looked at the bottle, then at her.

"You came back," he said.

"Yes, sir."

"Starlight don't stay, does it?"

"No, sir."

He held out his hand. Lina hesitated. The glass was cold against her palms. She thought of the moment the light had flared—that single heartbeat of summer morning in their dark cottage. She thought of Mama's face, softened for just an instant.

She handed him the bottle.

He took it without a word and tossed it onto the rubbish heap. It landed among the coffee grounds and crushed petals, rolling to a stop against the chair with one missing leg. The glass caught the morning light and threw a thin, clear gleam.

Then it was still.

Lina turned and walked away. Her feet carried her home, though she did not feel them touch the ground.

That evening, Mama lit a single candle.

It was a tallow candle, cheap and smoky, the kind that burned fast and left a greasy smell in the air. Mama placed it in the centre of the table, where the starlight bottle had sat. The flame was small and orange, nothing like the golden glow Lina had dreamed of. It cast long shadows that danced on the walls like hungry fingers.

Timmo sat close to the candle, warming his hands. Mama picked up her mending—another merchant's coat, fine wool that needed invisible stitches. The candlelight pooled on her work, leaving the corners of the room in darkness.

Lina sat by the window. Through the grimy glass, she could see the manor on the hill, its windows blazing with bottled starlight. Each window shone like a captured moon, steady and bright and endless. She could almost hear the laughter of the merchant's children, playing in rooms with no shadows.

She looked at the candle. Its flame fluttered, hungry for the last of its tallow.

"Mama," she said. "Why is magic only for the rich?"

Her mother's needle paused. She looked at Lina, and her eyes held that same tiredness, but also something else. Something like a door closing gently.

"Because, my love," she said, "the people who sell the light have decided who gets to see."

Lina turned back to the window. The starlight on the hill blazed on, indifferent and beautiful and far away.

The candle sputtered. The flame shrank. Timmo leaned closer, but the warmth did not grow.

And Lina understood, in a way she could not put into words, that the world was full of lights she would never touch. That the bottle in the rubbish heap had been a gift and a cruelty all at once—a glimpse of something warm, handed to her only to teach her how cold she truly was.

The candle went out.

Mama did not light another. There was no more tallow.

They sat in the dark, the three of them, until the moon rose and spilled its silver light through the window. It fell on the table where the bottle had been, and on the empty space where the starlight might have stayed, if wishes were the kind of things that fed a flame.

The Lotus of Empty Hands

> *When a wealthy merchant organizes a contest to claim a magical lotus that grants one wish, the villagers of a small kingdom compete so fiercely that they ruin the very source of the lotus's power, learning too late that the contest was designed only to enrich the merchant.*

Ravi tended his turnip patch beside the village pond. The turnips were small and dusty, but they grew straight in the sandy soil, and Ravi was proud of them. He sang a quiet song as he pulled weeds, a tune his mother had taught him about clouds and goats and the kindness of rain.

The pond was not a large pond. Frogs liked it, and dragonflies, and a few fat ducks that paddled in lazy circles. But in the center of the pond floated the Lotus of Contentment. Everyone in the village knew about it. The lotus had petals the color of sunset and a smell like honey and cinnamon mixed together. It only bloomed under the light of the full moon, and anyone who plucked it at that moment could make one sincere wish. Not a greedy wish, mind you. A sincere wish. The lotus knew the difference.

Ravi had never tried to wish. He liked looking at the lotus, watching it sway in the breeze, and thinking that some things were too beautiful to be used.

One afternoon, a rumbling noise came from the dirt road that led into the village. Ravi looked up from his turnips. A cart painted bright red and orange rolled into the square. It had a striped canopy and bells that jingled with every bump. Four horses pulled it, and behind the cart walked two big men with thick arms and calm faces.

The cart stopped by the pond. A man stepped out. He wore a purple

robe with golden stitching and a hat shaped like a tower. His beard was trimmed to a sharp point, and his rings sparkled in the sun.

"Good people of the village!" he said, spreading his arms. "I am Merchant Seth, and I bring you a magnificent opportunity!"

The villagers gathered around. They had never seen such a fine cart or such a shiny hat. Children pressed forward to touch the bells.

Merchant Seth smiled. He reached into the cart and lifted out a large mirror in a fancy golden frame. He tapped the glass with his knuckle, and the mirror began to glow. A voice came from it, smooth like syrup:

"Attention, residents of the little village near the pond! The Lotus of Contentment is now a prize! Present your best offerings by moonrise. The one who brings the most treasures will claim the lotus and make a wish!"

The villagers gasped. Some of them clapped. No one had ever thought of a contest for the lotus. It was just something that floated in the pond, like a story no one told.

Merchant Seth put the mirror away. He smiled again, but his eyes did not smile. "You have until the moon rises. Bring flowers, fruits, jewels, fine cloth, anything of value. The strongest offering wins the prize."

Then he sat on a stool beside his cart and waited.

For a moment, no one moved. Then the baker's wife dropped her basket and ran toward the forest. The carpenter set down his saw and followed. The children dashed for the grove where star-flowers grew. In minutes, the whole village had scattered to gather offerings.

Ravi did not move. He watched the pond. The lotus bobbed gently, unaware of the frenzy.

His sister Maya came running past, her arms full of yellow blossoms. "Ravi! Aren't you going to join? We could win!"

"I don't know," said Ravi. "It doesn't feel right."

"Don't be silly," said Maya, and she dashed away.

Ravi stayed by his turnips. He watched Merchant Seth sit on his stool, polishing his rings with a soft cloth. The two guards walked slowly around the edge of the pond. They did not gather offerings. They did not help. They simply circled the water, then walked a little way up the main road, looking at the ground.

One of them took a small knife and cut a notch in a tree. The other placed a white stone at the base of another tree.

Ravi squinted. The guards were making a trail. A trail leading away from the pond.

He scratched his head. Why would someone mark a road they did not plan to walk?

The feeling crept over him like cold water dripping down his back. Something about this contest was not a contest at all.

The villagers did not walk to the forest. They ran. They shoved past one another, and their feet kicked up dust. The baker's wife pulled branches off the star-apple tree. The carpenter swung his axe at a flowering bush. Children ripped petals from every bloom they could reach, and the air filled with torn leaves and broken stems.

Ravi stood at the edge of his turnip patch and watched. He wanted to shout, but his voice felt too small.

The forest had always been kind to the village. It gave shade in summer and wood for fires and berries for the children's pockets. Now it looked like a battle had passed through. Branches lay on the ground like snapped bones. Roots stuck up from the soil, pale and twisted. A young sapling had been yanked out entirely, its tiny white roots trailing dirt.

Maya came back with her arms full of orange moon-flowers. Her sleeves were torn, and there was a scratch on her cheek. She did not seem to notice.

"Ravi, look what I found!" She held up the flowers. "These will surely win."

"Maya, please stop," Ravi said. "The guards are marking a trail. They plan to leave. This is a trick."

Maya frowned. "What trick? Merchant Seth said whoever brings the most wins."

"And what does he gain?" Ravi asked. "He gets all our offerings. Then he leaves. The lotus stays in the pond."

Maya looked at her flowers. She looked at the other villagers piling their treasures near the cart. The pile was already as tall as a man. She bit her lip.

But before she could answer, old Man Phong shuffled past. His back was bent, and he used a walking stick. He peered at the pile and shook his head.

"The lotus feeds on moonlight," he muttered. "Moonlight filtered through gentle hearts. Not greedy heaps of stolen things."

No one listened. The carpenter laughed. "Old Phong, your brain is as dusty as your house. The lotus is a prize, and we are going to win it."

Ravi stepped forward. "Please, everyone! Think for a moment. Why would a rich merchant give away a wish for free? He only wants your goods. He will take them and go!"

The baker's wife turned. Her hands were stained with berry juice. "Quiet, farmer boy! You're just jealous because your turnips are ugly."

The crowd laughed. Someone threw a rotten apple. It hit Ravi's shoulder and burst. He stepped back. There was nothing he could say.

The sun sank behind the hills. The evening air grew cool. The villagers lifted their offerings—baskets of fruit, bundles of cloth, jars of honey, silver trinkets, and yes, the amber earrings and the

bag of star-rice—and carried them to the pond. They stacked them around the edge. Higher and higher. The pile rose until it blocked the last rays of light.

Ravi looked at the lotus. It was still closed, waiting for the moon.

The moon rose. A thin crescent. Then a half. Then a full white circle.

But the moonlight could not reach the lotus. The offerings made a wall of shadow around the pond.

The lotus trembled. Its petals fluttered. A soft sound, like a sigh, came from the center.

Then the petals turned gray. Then brown. Then they crumbled into ash and fell upon the water like dusty snow.

The villagers gasped. Some cried out. The baker's wife dropped her basket.

Merchant Seth stood up from his stool and brushed off his robe. He snapped his fingers, and the two guards gathered up the offerings—all the flowers, the fruits, the jewels, the star-rice—and loaded them onto the painted cart. The horses snorted.

"Well, well," said Seth, climbing onto the driver's seat. "It appears the lotus has expired. The contest is void, I'm afraid. Good luck with your empty pond."

He laughed. It was a high, sharp laugh.

The woman with the silver combs flicked the reins. The cart rolled away, bells jingling, down the road marked with notches and white stones. The guards followed, carrying armfuls of treasure.

The villagers stood in silence. The pond was dark. The lotus was gone.

Ravi knelt at the edge. He dipped his hand into the water. It was cold, and he pulled out only a smear of gray ash.

Maya came and sat beside him. She was crying, but she did not say anything.

Behind them, the village began to argue. Voices rose, fingers pointed. No one noticed that old Man Phong had slipped away into the shadows, or that a single seed, no bigger than a teardrop, had fallen into Maya's pocket when the lotus crumbled.

Ravi looked up. The moon was bright and empty. The forest was broken. The pond was useless.

He had nothing left but his dusty turnip patch and a quiet ache in his chest.

The village did not sleep that night. Candles burned in small windows, and voices rose like smoke from every house. Some said the baker's wife had started the destruction. Others blamed the carpenter. A few pointed at Maya, because she had gathered the most flowers. Maya stayed in her room and said nothing.

Ravi sat on his cot and stared at the wall. He felt tired, but not the kind of tired that sleep fixes. It was the kind of tired that sits in the bones and hums.

Maya came to his door. Her face was pale, and her hands were empty.

"Ravi," she said. "I have something."

She opened her palm. In the center lay a seed, no bigger than a teardrop. It was the color of dried honey, with a faint shimmer.

"I found it in my pocket," she said. "When the lotus fell apart. One petal dropped a seed before it turned to ash."

Ravi took the seed. It was warm, as if it still held a little bit of the moon.

"We should plant it," he said.

"In the pond?" Maya asked.

"No. The pond is poisoned with greed now. We need clean soil and clean water."

So they walked to the back of Ravi's turnip patch, behind the crooked fence where the sun hit the ground just right. Ravi dug a small hole with his fingers. He placed the seed inside and covered it

The Storekeeper's Decent Bargain

> *An honest storekeeper begins to make tiny compromises to keep his family fed, each small choice eroding his conscience until he becomes a wealthy robber baron bowing to the giant baby king.*

The Storekeeper’s Decent Bargain

The village of Stoten sat at the edge of a forest that whispered with old magic, and Cedric the storekeeper had always believed that an honest trade was a trade worth making. His father had taught him this, and his father before that, and for three generations the shop in the square had sold potions that worked fair, charms tied true, and lanterns that burned steady and bright.

But winter came to Stoten like a thief with cold hands, and it would not leave.

On the forty-seventh day of snow, Cedric stood behind his counter rubbing his arms for warmth. The shop was dark—not the cozy darkness of evening, when bottled starlight would have lit the windows like amber, but the sorry dimness of a room with no light at all. Twelve glass vessels lined his shelves, each one capable of holding a week of steady glow, and every single one as dark as a shut eye.

He could not afford to fill them.

The starlight merchant had passed through twice since autumn, and both times his prices climbed higher than Cedric’s fingers could

reach. A single bottle now cost what a barrel of flour had cost the year before. The big shops in the capital could pay, of course. The nobles could pay. But a storekeeper in a small village, with a wife and two children and a roof that leaked snowmelt into the back room?

“Papa, why is it so dark?”

Lena, his youngest, had wandered in wrapped in a blanket. She was six, with her mother’s round cheeks and her father’s habit of tilting her head when she asked questions.

Cedric forced a smile. “Saving the starlight for evening, little mouse. Don’t need it during the day.”

“But I can see my breath.”

He could see it too—little white puffs rising from her mouth like tiny ghosts.

“Go warm yourself by the kitchen fire. Tell Mama I’ll be in soon.”

She scampered away, and Cedric turned back to his shelves. He had stock. Good stock, mostly. Healing potions brewed with proper valerian root. Strength charms woven with clean spider-silk. Lanterns with crystal cores that sang when you tapped them. He was not a cheat. He had never been a cheat.

But the flour bin was low, and Lena’s coat had holes at the elbows, and his son Tomas had asked twice this week why they ate porridge instead of bread.

These thoughts were still running through his mind when the shop door opened and Old Grell walked in.

Old Grell was not truly old, though he looked it. He was a trader who passed through Stoten twice a year, buying cheap and selling dear somewhere else. His coat was patchwork leather, his beard gray with road dust, and his eyes had the flat look of a man who had stopped asking questions long ago.

“Storekeeper,” Grell said, stamping snow from his boots.

“Trader.”

Grell looked around the dim shop and smiled a smile that did not reach his eyes. “Dark in here. Business slow?”

“Winter.”

“Winter,” Grell agreed. He walked along the shelves, picking up a potion here, a charm there, turning them over in his grimy hands. “Good stock. I know your work. Honest work.”

“Yes.”

“Honest work is hard to find these days,” Grell said. “And hard to sell, when honest people can’t afford it.”

Cedric said nothing.

Grell stopped at the lantern shelf. Six lanterns stood in a row, each fitted with a crystal core that could hold a captured starbeam and cast it back as steady light. Five were perfect. The sixth had a crack running through its core—a hairline fracture, invisible unless you held it to the light at just the right angle.

Cedric had meant to fix it. He had meant to melt down the crystal and recast it, but the materials cost silver he did not have, and the crack was so small, so very small, that surely no one would notice for a month or more.

Grell picked up the cracked lantern.

“How much for this one?”

Cedric’s mouth went dry. He could tell him. He could say, *That one has a flaw—it will flicker and die within a month.* He could point to the perfect ones and offer a fair price.

He thought of Lena’s breath in the cold morning air.

“Twenty silver.”

Grell raised an eyebrow. “For a lantern? That’s dear.”

“It’s good crystal.”

“Is it?” Grell turned it over, held it to the dim light. The crack was there, silver-thin and waiting, but Grell’s eyes were old and tired and not looking for flaws. He grunted. “Fifteen.”

“Eighteen.”

“Sixteen, and I’ll be gone before the snow picks up.”

Cedric’s hands were shaking. He put them in his pockets. “Done.”

Grell counted out sixteen silver coins and placed them on the counter. They were cold and heavy and real. Cedric picked them up one by one and dropped them into his purse, and the sound they made was louder than it should have been.

Grell tucked the lantern under his arm and walked out into the snow.

The shop was very quiet.

Then Marta called from the kitchen that supper was ready, and Lena laughed at something Tomas said, and the sound of that laughter traveled through the cold air and wrapped itself around Cedric’s heart. He went into the back room, where the fire was lit and the children were warm. Marta had made stew from the last of the root vegetables, with a bit of dried meat she had been saving. She looked at him as he sat down, a question in her eyes that she did not ask aloud.

He answered it anyway.

“Just one small compromise,” he said, taking her hand. “To get us through the winter.”

Marta squeezed his hand and looked at the children, who were laughing again, and said nothing at all.

Cedric ate his stew and watched his children’s faces in the firelight. They were warm. They were fed. They were laughing.

And somewhere in the dark of his chest, a small, quiet thing that had once been his conscience curled up and went to sleep.

The winter passed, as winters do, and spring came to Stoten with mud and thin sunshine. Cedric used the sixteen silver to buy starlight and flour, and with his shop lit and customers able to see his goods, business picked up. By midsummer he had paid off his debts.

But the starlight merchant came dear again that autumn, raising his price by another copper per bottle. Cedric looked at his ledgers and saw that if he sold his healing potions at the usual strength, he would barely break even. So he added an extra cup of water to each brew. Just a little. Just enough to stretch the batch. The potions still worked—they simply took longer to heal a cut or settle a stomach. No one complained.

Marta noticed. She helped him bottle the stock, and she knew the look of proper valerian root tea. “This is thinner than last year’s,” she said one evening.

“It’s fine,” said Cedric, not looking up from his accounts.

She waited a moment, then set the bottle down and went to check on the children.

That winter, a farmer came to the shop with a strength charm that had snapped in half. He had bought it from Cedric the month before. Inside the charm, Cedric had hidden a web of cheap spider silk—strong enough to hold during the weaving, but brittle once the magic set. He had used it because proper silk was expensive and the cheap kind was all he could afford. He told the farmer it was a manufacturing flaw and replaced it with a good one. But he did not throw away the broken charm. He sold it to a traveling peddler who did not ask questions, for half the usual price.

The peddler was not Old Grell, but his eyes had the same flat look.

By the third year, Cedric had learned which inspectors could be bribed and which could not. Baron Torvin’s man was a thin fellow

named Herrick, who had three children and a wife with a cough that would not leave. Cedric paid Herrick a handful of copper to overlook the watered potions and the mixed-grade charms. Herrick took the coins without meeting his eyes and signed the inspection papers with a trembling hand.

Marta stopped coming to the shop. She stayed in the kitchen with the children—now four of them, twins having come in the fifth year—and she spoke less than she used to. When Cedric asked what was wrong, she said only, “The children are fed and warm.”

The years passed like snow melting into mud. Cedric’s shop grew into a warehouse. He bought the building next door and knocked through the wall. He employed three assistants and a bookkeeper. He sold starlight wholesale to the villages beyond Stoten, and he bought his crystal cores from a new supplier who did not ask where the spider silk came from.

He told himself he had done what he had to. He had saved his family. The children had never gone hungry. They had good coats and strong shoes. Tomas was apprenticed to a clockmaker in the capital. Lena had married a miller’s son and lived in a house with a proper hearth. The twins were learning their letters.

But sometimes, late at night, Cedric would find himself staring at the cracked crystal core on his desk—the one he had kept as a reminder, he once told himself, of what he would never do again. The crack was no longer a reminder. It was a trophy.

In the ninth year, Baron Torvin came to Cedric. The baron was old and tired and deep in debt to the starlight merchants. His lands were mortgaged to the crystal mines. He had no heirs and no hope.

“I will sell you the barony,” Torvin said, sitting in Cedric’s counting room with his hands shaking on his cane. “The title. The land. The starlight trade within it. You have the silver.”

Cedric looked at the old man. Ten years ago, he would have been honored to even speak to a baron. Now he saw only a desperate creature, worn down by the same world that had worn him down.

“How much?”

Torvin named a price. It was less than the barony was worth, but more money than Cedric had ever imagined holding. He had it. He counted it out from the vault in his cellar, coin by coin, and watched the old baron’s face crumble as the wealth changed hands.

The papers were signed on a cold morning in winter. Cedric of Stoten, storekeeper, became Baron Cedric of the Stoten Marches, master of the starlight trade and lord over a small territory of struggling villages and frozen fields.

He stood in the baron’s manor—*his* manor now—and looked out the window at the village below. The shop he had once owned was still there, but someone else ran it. Someone honest, perhaps. Someone who had not yet learned that a small compromise was only the first step down a long, dark road.

Marta stood beside him, quieter than she had ever been. “The children are fed,” she said, and her voice was the color and texture of stone.

Cedric did not answer. He looked at his reflection in the window glass and saw a stranger wearing a baron’s finery.

The summons came in spring.

Baron Cedric of the Stoten Marches was required at court to kneel before King Maximus Victorious and receive the royal blessing for his new title. It was an old tradition, one that could not be avoided, though everyone knew what waited in the throne room.

Cedric traveled to the capital in a carriage drawn by four white horses, wearing velvet and silver thread. The palace rose before him like a confection of white stone and gold leaf, its towers scraping the sky, its gates wide enough for twenty men to walk through abreast. Servants in livery bowed as he passed. Courtiers in silks nodded with practiced smiles.

And yet, as he walked the long corridor to the throne room, Cedric

felt the weight of every step.

The doors swung open.

The throne room was vast and bright, lit by a thousand bottles of starlight that hung from the ceiling in crystal chandeliers. Nobles lined the walls in their finest clothes, their faces carefully blank. At the far end of the room, on a throne carved from a single block of moonstone, sat King Maximus Victorious.

He was enormous. That was the first thing Cedric noticed—not the size of a man, but the size of a house, a great pink bulk spilling over the arms of the throne. His face was round and soft, his eyes wide and vacant, and a smear of something orange clung to his chin. He wore a crown that kept slipping down over one ear, and he was babbling.

“Ba-ba-ba-GAH,” said the king, and slapped his fat hand against the arm of the throne.

An attendant in dark robes stepped forward. “His Majesty welcomes you to his court, Baron Cedric, and looks upon you with favor.”

“Ba-WAH,” said the king, and drooled.

“His Majesty notes your long journey and commends your dedication to the crown.”

Cedric walked forward. The nobles watched him pass, their eyes glittering like the starlight above. He knew what they saw: a shopkeeper playing at nobility, a man who had bought his title with silver earned from watered potions and broken charms. He knew because he saw it too.

He reached the dais and knelt.

The stone floor was cold against his knees. Above him, the giant baby king gurgled and cooed, and an attendant leaned close to translate the nonsense into something resembling governance. Cedric bowed his head and let the words wash over him—blessings and honors and duties to the realm, all spoken by a man in dark robes while the true king chewed on his own fingers.

And as he knelt there, Cedric felt it.

The small, quiet thing in his chest stirred. It did not wake—it was too late for that, too long asleep, too buried under years of small compromises and easy rationalizations. But it turned over in its dark bed, and for one terrible moment, Cedric remembered everything.

The cracked lantern and Old Grell's flat eyes.

The watered potions and Marta's silence.

The broken charm and Herrick's trembling hand.

The old baron's crumbling face as the coins changed hands.

Every small choice. Every tiny step. Every moment he had told himself it was just this once, just to get through the winter, just to keep the children fed.

"Ba-ba-ba-BOOM," said the king, and laughed a wet, gurgling laugh.

"His Majesty is pleased," said the attendant. "You may rise, Baron Cedric."

Cedric rose. His knees ached. His fine clothes felt heavy as armor. He looked up at the giant baby on the throne, at the vacant eyes and the drool-slick chin, and he understood with perfect clarity that he was kneeling to a creature who could not even speak, who ruled nothing, who was propped up by attendants and ignored by every kingdom that mattered.

And he understood, too, that he was no different.

He had built his fortune on suffering he once would have condemned. He had become the very thing he despised. And now he would go home to his manor and his silent wife and his distant children, and he would rule his small territory and trade his starlight, and he would never speak of what he had done.

But he would know.

He would always know.

Cedric turned and walked back down the long corridor, past the bowing servants and the smiling courtiers, past the thousand bottles of starlight burning bright and cold. Behind him, the giant baby king babbled on, and the attendants translated, and the kingdom pretended.

And somewhere in the dark of Cedric's chest, the small, quiet thing that had once been his conscience turned over once more and lay still.

The Fisherboy and the Baron's Toll

> *A young boy learns to fish from a greedy Baron who owns the river and charges for every net and worm, but as the fish grow scarce, the boy learns a harder lesson about who truly owns the water.*

The Fisherboy and the Baron’s Toll

Once upon a time, in a kingdom ruled by a giant baby who babbled about lollipops and signed charters with tiny, jam-sticky handprints, there lived a boy named Pip. He and his mother dwelt in a cottage that leaned a little to the left, just beside a wide, glittering river. Every morning Pip watched the fishermen pull silver-scaled fish from the water, and every morning he begged his mother for a chance to try.

“Please, Mum,” he said, tugging her apron. “Just one day. I’ll catch a hundred fish and we’ll have a feast.”

His mother had dark circles under her eyes and a voice that always sounded tired. “The river isn’t free, my love. Baron Grumble owns the fishing rights. You need a license, and you must buy his special worms. It all costs coin.”

“I’ll earn it back!” Pip promised. “I’ll catch more than anyone.”

She looked at him—his bright eyes, his bony shoulders—and sighed. Then she went to the cupboard where she kept a little clay pot of savings. It was meant for winter wood. She counted out six coppers and placed them in his small, hot hand. “Be careful, Pip.”

He ran all the way to the riverbank, where a red-and-gold tent stood like a small castle. Inside sat Baron Grumble himself, a round man with a face like a boiled ham and a smile full of golden teeth.

“Well, well, a new fisherman!” the Baron boomed. “How splendid! That will be two coppers for the license, two coppers for the blessed worms, and two coppers for the rental of our finest wooden pole.”

Pip handed over every coin. The Baron gave him a shiny pole and a little pouch of squirming, pale worms. They were called “blessed” because the Baron said a special spell over them, though no one knew where the worms really came from. Pip did not care.

He walked to the water’s edge and dipped his line. The river was so clear he could see the pebbles at the bottom. Fish swam in thick silver clouds, their scales catching the sun. On his first try he pulled up a fat, wriggling fish.

“Look!” he shouted to the Baron, who was watching from a velvet chair under an umbrella.

“Excellent!” the Baron said. “But remember, every fish costs a fee. That one will be one copper when you sell it. And the net you are not using yet—there is a tax for that too. And the water itself—well, we can discuss that later.”

Pip did not understand. He only wanted to catch more. He cast again and again, and each time a fish bit. By midday his basket was full of silver scales and flopping tails. He ran home, bursting through the door. “Mum! Look!”

She looked at the fish. She looked at his happy face. She smiled, but it was a thin smile, like paper stretched over a hole. “How much did the Baron charge you for the pole?”

“Six coppers,” said Pip.

“And you will have to pay to sell those fish at the market. Did he tell you that?”

Pip stopped counting his catch. “No.”

“He will. And next week the license might cost more, and the worms might cost more, because he owns them all.”

Pip shook his head. “But the river is full of fish! I will be the best fisherman in the kingdom. I will catch enough to pay everything and still have plenty.”

His mother did not answer. She turned to the stove and began to clean the fish. That night Pip lay in bed, dreaming of silver fish and shiny poles. He did not think about the coins his mother had given him. He did not think about why a man could own a river, or why fish should have fees. He only thought about tomorrow, when he would catch even more. And the river glittered on, indifferent, as rivers always are.

Years passed, as they do, even in fairytales.

Pip was no longer a bright-eyed boy. He was a lanky young man with hollow cheeks, and his hands were cracked like old leather from the river water. The great silver clouds of fish had thinned to lonely stragglers. The Baron’s men had come with wide nets and fast boats, and they had pulled up everything that swam. Then they had sold the fish in other kingdoms, far away, where the rivers had already been emptied.

Pip had to stay out from dawn to dusk now. He cast his line again and again, and often he caught nothing at all. When he did hook a fish, it was small and scrawny, barely worth the fee the Baron charged to sell it at the market. The fees had risen, of course. The license cost four coppers now, the worms three—extra blessed, the Baron said, by a very expensive sorcerer Pip never saw. And there was a new fee: a “water usage tax,” one copper for every hour Pip stood in the river. The Baron’s men came by with a little glass timer to measure.

One afternoon, as Pip stood ankle-deep in the cold water, a shadow fell over him. Baron Grumble was seated on the bank in a wide velvet chair with little wheels, pushed by two attendants. He held a tall glass of bottled starlight tea that glowed faintly pink and gave off a soft, pleasant warmth. “You are so lucky, young Pip!” he said, his voice oily and pleasant. “When I was your age, I had no river at

all. I had to buy my fish from a man who bought them from a man who caught them in a puddle. You have the real thing, right here every day. What a privilege!"

Pip said nothing. He pulled his line from the water. Empty.

"Now, now, don't be gloomy. The fish will come back. They always do. It's just a slow season. And I am helping you by keeping the prices steady, so you know what to expect. Steady is good, isn't it? No surprises."

The license had gone up by a copper every season for three years. The worm fee had doubled. The water tax had not existed at all when Pip started. But he only nodded, because that was what you did when the Baron spoke.

When Pip came home that evening, his mother was lying on her bed. She had been lying there for three days, with a small, tight knot in her forehead that would not go away. "The cough will pass," she said. "I just need more rest, is all." But she was thin, thinner than Pip, and her voice was barely a whisper. The worry had worn her down like a river stone. She had worried about the winter wood that became a fishing license. She had worried about the meals that became worm fees. She had worried so much that there was nothing left of her but worry and bones.

Pip went to the market and looked at the stall that sold memory crystals—little diamonds, clear as glass, that captured a person's likeness and voice. The cheapest crystal cost fifteen coppers. Pip had saved two coppers in a jar under his bed, after four months of eating less and fishing more. He caught his best fish the next morning, a large one with scales like silver coins, and took it to the Baron's market stall. The Baron looked at it and nodded. "That is a fine fish, Pip. I will give you four coppers for it."

"It is worth six," said Pip quietly.

"Normally yes," said the Baron, smiling, his golden teeth glittering. "But today there is a market fee of two coppers for large fish. Supply is low, you see, so the cost of selling is high. You'll get four, take it or leave it."

Pip took it. He had six coppers now. Nine more to go. He fished for three days straight, barely sleeping, his hands bleeding into the water. On the third night, he had saved eight coppers. Seven more to go. On the fourth morning, he found his mother cold in her bed. Her hands were folded on her chest, and her face was smooth and still, without a ripple of worry. For the first time in years, she looked at peace.

Pip stood in the doorway for a long time. Then he went to the cupboard and pulled out the clay pot she had used to give him his first license. It was empty. He did not buy the memory crystal. The dead do not need to be remembered in crystal, the old women said. They need to be remembered in the heart. But Pip's heart was heavy and dark, and he could not find her face in it. He could only see her thin smile the day he brought home his first fish.

He walked to the river at twilight. The water was gray and quiet. The sky was the color of a bruise. No fish jumped. No birds called. The wooden pole was in his hand, but his hand did not move. He stood there, motionless, empty-handed, hollow-eyed. And for the first time, a question rose in his mind, like a single bubble from the deep: *If the river belongs to the Baron, why is it dying?* He looked at the water. It did not look like it belonged to anyone. It looked like it had been there before coins or fees, before licenses or worms, before the Baron was even born. He stood there until the stars came out, and he did not catch a single fish.

The morning arrived gray and damp, as if the sky itself had grown tired of watching. Pip walked to the river one last time. His back was bent, and his hair had streaks of white in it, though he was not yet old by count of years. The wooden pole he carried was the same one the Baron had given him on the first day, now chipped and weary.

The Baron was already there, sitting in his velvet chair on the bank. Two attendants fanned him with large leaves, and a third held a glass of glowing pink tea. The Baron was laughing, his round belly jiggling like a pudding. "A drought fee!" he said to his attendants. "Yes, yes, that will be perfect. The river is low, you see, so I must charge extra for the privilege of fishing in shallower water. It is only fair. I am providing a service by letting them stand in my

river.”

The attendants nodded and smiled. They always nodded and smiled.

Pip stopped at the edge of the water. The Baron looked up and beamed. “Ah, Pip! My oldest customer! You have come just in time. I was about to post the new fees. There will be a drought fee of one copper per hour, starting today. Also a low-fish surcharge of two coppers per catch, to account for the scarcity. You understand, I am sure.”

Pip did not answer. He looked at the river. It was lower than he had ever seen it. The stones on the bottom were exposed in patches, and what water remained moved sluggishly, like a tired old thing. He stepped into the river. He did not take out his license. He did not reach for his pouch of worms, because he had not bought any. The water was cold against his ankles, and it felt no different than it had on the first day.

“Pip!” the Baron called, his voice sharp. “You have not shown me your license. And you have no worms. You are fishing illegally. That will be a fine of ten coppers.”

Pip kept walking. The water rose to his knees.

“Pip, I am warning you. I will have my attendants drag you out. The king himself has decreed that my river rights are absolute. His Royal Babyness Maximus Victorious signed the charter personally, with his own tiny handprints.”

Pip stopped in the middle of the river. The water was up to his waist now, and he could feel the cold seeping into his bones. He turned to face the Baron. The Baron’s face was red. His golden teeth were bared in a tight smile. “You are making a mistake, boy. You owe me. You owe me for every fish you ever caught, every worm you used, every copper you borrowed from your mother’s savings.”

At the mention of his mother, Pip’s jaw tightened. But he did not shout. He spoke quietly, and his voice carried in the still morning air. “Baron, look at my nets.” He held up the old, patched net with

wide holes. It was empty. “Look at the river. Where are the fish? I have been fishing for years. You have been taking fees for years. The fish are gone. The river is dying. If you own all of this, why is it dead?”

The Baron’s smile flickered. “That is nature, Pip. The fish come and go. It has nothing to do with me.”

“Then what did I pay for?” Pip asked. “If you do not control the fish, what did I buy with all those coppers? With my mother’s winter wood? With her health? With my hands and my back and my years?”

The Baron opened his mouth, but no words came out. He looked at his attendants, who looked at the ground.

Pip waded to a shallow spot where a single small fish swam in a puddle. It was a thin, pale thing, barely alive. He cupped it gently in his hands. “This is the last fish,” he said. “Mine, yours, or anyone’s.” He opened his hands. The fish flopped into the water, and with a weak flick, it disappeared downstream.

Pip turned and walked to the bank. He did not look at the Baron. He stepped onto dry land, water dripping from his trousers, and laid the wooden pole on the grass. “I am done,” he said.

The Baron sputtered. “You cannot be done! You owe me for the drought fee, the license, the—the—” He waved his hands. “You cannot just leave. The river is mine. I have the charter. I have the king’s blessing. You have to pay.”

Pip did not answer. He walked up the hill behind the river, his steps slow but steady. The Baron shouted after him. “Come back here! I will have you arrested! I will have your cottage seized! I will—I will —” But Pip kept walking.

At the top of the hill, Pip sat down on a large, flat stone. He looked at the river below. The Baron was still shouting, his voice thin and distant, like the cry of a small, angry bird. His attendants were gathering the velvet chair and the glass of tea, preparing to leave. The river glittered in the pale sunlight. It did not care about the

Baron or his fees. It did not care about charters or handprints. It was just water, flowing to the sea, as it had done for a thousand years before the Baron was born.

Pip sat there for a long time. He thought about his mother, and her thin smile, and the clay pot of savings. He thought about the fish he had caught and the fees he had paid. He thought about the years that had passed, like water through his fingers. And he understood, at last, that the river had never belonged to the Baron. It had belonged to everyone, until everyone agreed that it belonged to him. Some things cannot be owned, Pip thought. They can only be borrowed, for a little while, until we die.

He stood up, brushed the dirt from his trousers, and walked home. He did not look back.

The Baker's Sunlight Problem

> *When the bottled starlight that lights his bakery starts flickering because the starlight cartel raised the price again due to a war the giant baby king declared, a simple baker must decide whether to bake in the dark or make a deal with a faerie who offers free light—for a terrible price.*

The Baker's Sunlight Problem

Old Kofi had closed his bakery early, which he had not done in thirty years. The sun had barely begun to think about setting, yet there he was, dimming the bottled starlight jars one by one with a heavy hand.

The Starlight Cartel had sent a messenger that morning. The price had doubled again. The messenger, a thin man with a thin smile, blamed the war that King Maximus Victorious had declared from his royal crib. The war had stopped the volcano-gem shipments, and without volcano gems the starlight simply would not burn. It was all terribly logical, in the way that makes no sense at all to a baker who just wants to see his dough rising.

Kofi sighed and wiped flour from his hands. His morning sales had been dreadful. The loaves came out pale and sad, under-baked in the center, because he could not afford enough light to judge them properly. Some days he stood in the dimness and guessed. Guessing, as any baker knows, is the first step toward ruin.

A shimmer caught his eye.

In the doorway stood a faerie no taller than a rolling pin. She had hair like spun gold and a smile like sugar candy fresh from the mold. In her tiny hands she held a jar, and inside the jar something

glowed—not the cold blue of starlight, but the warm buttery yellow of a summer morning.

“Good evening, baker,” said the faerie. Her voice sounded like tiny silver bells. “I see you are having a spot of bother with your lights.”

Kofi squinted at her. Faeries in this part of the world were not exactly trustworthy. But then, neither were starlight cartels.

“The cartel raised the price again,” he said. “I cannot afford to bake as I used to. Tomorrow I might not bake at all.”

The faerie held out the jar. “This is trapped sunlight. It never dims, never costs a single copper coin. I will give it to you freely.”

Kofi’s hands stopped mid-wipe. “Freely? Nothing in this world is free, little one.”

“Ah, but the price is so small.” Her smile widened, just enough to show teeth that were slightly too sharp. “Each week, you must whisper one lie about your neighbors into the jar. That is all. One tiny lie, and the sunlight stays bright forever.”

Kofi stared at the jar. It was warm. He could feel the warmth from across the room, and it made his fingers ache to hold it. He thought of his empty coin purse. He thought of the pale loaves and the customers who had walked away that morning. He thought of Marta, his neighbor, who had won first prize at the fair with her goat.

“A lie?” he said.

“A very small one. Nothing cruel. Just a little story.”

Kofi took the jar. It felt heavy and alive, like something breathing. He cupped his hands around it and leaned close. The warmth spread through his fingers like a promise.

“Marta’s goat did not really win first prize,” he whispered. “The judge was her cousin.”

The light flared. It blazed golden and fierce, filling every corner of

the bakery until the starlight jars looked like sickly blue fireflies. Kofi blinked and stepped back. The faerie giggled and vanished like a popped bubble.

That night, Kofi baked as he had not baked in weeks. Crusty loaves with crackling tops. Soft rolls that pulled apart like clouds. Sweet buns that smelled of honey and cardamom. The jar hung from a hook above his workbench, pouring out sunlight that never wavered. He worked until his arms ached, and when he finally slept, he dreamed of nothing at all.

Weeks passed, and the jar grew brighter.

The first lie had been so small that Kofi told himself it was nothing. A bit of fluff. A dandelion seed on the wind. But the jar seemed to remember. It pulsed a little warmer when he whispered over it.

The second week, he told the jar that Marta had stolen wool from the weaver's guild. He did not know why he said it. The words just came, and the jar drank them up. The next day at market, Marta did not wave. She looked at him strangely—brows drawn, mouth tight—and then turned away. Kofi told himself it was his imagination.

The third week, he whispered that the butcher shortchanged his customers by weighing his thumb on the scale. The butcher's shop grew quiet. People stopped buying sausages from him. Kofi bought a sausage that very day out of guilt, and the butcher counted his coins twice, then gave him a look like a dog that has been kicked for no reason at all.

Kofi's bakery thrived. The loaves were perfect. The customers came early and stayed late. His coin purse grew fat and satisfying. He bought new flour, new honey, a new apron with red stitching.

He told himself the lies were harmless. Dandelion fluff.

But the jar grew brighter with each whisper. It glowed with a fierce steady heat that made the old starlight jars look like cold blue tears. Sometimes when Kofi passed beneath it, he could swear the jar hummed—a low hungry sound, like a cat watching a bird.

The faerie began to visit more often. She appeared in the doorway just as he was closing, or perched on the edge of his flour bin while he kneaded dough. Her smile was wider now, stretched like pulled taffy. Her eyes glinted with the jar's own inner light.

"Good evening, baker. How is the sunlight treating you?"

"Very well," Kofi said, wiping sweat from his forehead.

"And your whispers? Are they growing interesting?"

"They are honest enough."

"Honest lies," said the faerie, and she giggled like wind chimes in a storm. "What a delicious contradiction. But do not be shy, baker. Spice them up. Make them memorable. The jar enjoys a story with teeth."

Kofi did not answer. But that night he stood before the jar and thought about what she had said. He remembered Marta's turned back. The butcher's wounded eyes. Those had been small lies. What harm could a slightly bigger lie do?

The answer arrived the next week, dressed up in a whisper.

Kofi leaned close to the jar and said, "The candlemaker's son, Tomas—the quiet boy with the kind eyes—has been stealing coins from the church collection box."

It was not true. Tomas had never stolen anything in his life. He was a shy boy who helped his father melt tallow and dip wicks. He had a gentle laugh that crinkled the corners of his eyes.

But lies do not care whether they are true. They spread like spilled oil, and soon the villagers shunned Tomas. They called him a thief behind cupped hands. The candlemaker's shop saw fewer customers. Tomas stopped coming to market. He stayed inside, and when Kofi saw him through the window one gray morning, the boy's face was pale and hollow as a scooped-out gourd.

A cold knot formed in Kofi's chest. It did not go away.

The jar now blazed so fiercely that he had to squint while he worked. The light was no longer warm and cozy. It hurt to look at, like the sun at noon reflecting off white sand. It cast hard black shadows across the bakery. Kofi's hands trembled as he shaped the dough.

He could not sleep. He lay in his cot and stared at the ceiling, and the knot in his chest tightened notch by notch. He thought of Tomas. He thought of Marta. He thought of the butcher. He thought of the faerie's sugar-sweet smile and the glint in her eyes, and he knew with a cold and sudden certainty that the price had never been one lie a week.

The price was him. His name. His peace. His soul, offered up in whispers—bit by bit, piece by piece—while he told himself he was just a baker trying to survive.

The rumor arrived like morning fog, thin at first and then thick as soup. Someone had whispered that Kofi baked his bread with rotten flour. That he scooped mold from the bottom of the sack and kneaded it into the dough to save a few pennies. That his golden loaves were poison wrapped in crust.

Kofi heard it from a customer who would not meet his eyes. The woman bought one roll, sniffed it, and set it back down. "No thank you, baker," she said, and left.

By midday, the shop was empty.

The jar of sunlight blazed from its hook, fierce and hungry, but the customers crossed the street to avoid Kofi's door. Marta walked by with her goat and did not glance his way. The butcher's shop, slowly recovering its trade, saw a line out the door.

The faerie appeared at dusk, perched on the flour bin like a bird on a wire. Her hair shimmered. Her smile was syrup poured over something old and patient.

"Poor baker," she said. "The whispers have turned on you. How terribly unfair."

Kofi did not look at her. “Who started the lie?”

“Does it matter? It is in the air now, like smoke. But I can help you.” She held up a second jar, smaller than the first, filled with a pale golden light. “One more whisper, and I will make the rumor disappear. This time, tell me that the mayor cheats the orphanage fund. It is a tasty lie. The jar will love it.”

Kofi turned. He saw the faerie’s eyes clearly at last. They were not kind. They had never been kind. They glinted like the jar’s cruel light, and beneath the sugar smile there was something old and patient and endlessly hungry.

He understood. The price had never been small. It had been everything.

“No,” said Kofi.

The faerie’s smile flickered. “No?”

Kofi reached up, pulled the jar of sunlight from its hook, and smashed it against the stone floor.

The glass shattered like a scream. The golden light burst into a thousand shards, each one a tiny flame that died as it fell. The faerie hissed—a sound like steam on a hot pan—and vanished into the dark corners where such things belong.

The bakery went dim. Only the cold blue of the starlight jars remained, and the orange flicker of the hearth-fire that Kofi had kept banked for years. He stood in the quiet, breathing hard. The knot in his chest eased, just a little.

That night, Kofi lit the hearth-fire properly for the first time in months. He mixed flour, water, salt, and yeast by the warm red glow. He shaped the loaves with his own hands and set them to rise on the hearth stones. The bread came out darker than before, with a thick crust and a humble smell. It was not perfect. It was not golden.

But it was honest.

The next morning, he set one loaf on the counter. A single customer came in, an old woman who had known Kofi since he was a boy. She bought the loaf, broke off a piece, and chewed slowly.

“It is good bread,” she said.

“It is all I have,” said Kofi.

She bought another loaf. Word spread slowly, the way truth spreads—like molasses in winter, not like spilled oil. The butcher came by. The candlemaker came by, though he did not smile. Marta came by with her goat, and Kofi gave her a free roll and an apology she did not answer. She took the roll and left, and Kofi hoped one day she might wave again.

Weeks passed. The bakery stayed dim, lit only by the hearth. The jagged pieces of the smashed jar lay swept into a corner. They no longer glowed. They were just broken things, harmless as old regrets. The starlight cartel’s price remained high, but Kofi learned to work with less. A good baker, he discovered, can do more with firelight than he ever thought possible.

He did not see the faerie again.

Each morning, before he lit the fire, Kofi looked at the pile of glass in the corner. Then he turned to the flour, and the water, and the yeast, and began again.

The Ebbing Light

> *An old widow's memory crystal of her husband is fading, and she must choose between spending her life savings on a rejuvenation spell or letting the memory go forever.*

The Ebbing Light

Evening crept across the Magenta Kingdom like a tired cat, bringing shadows that pooled in the corners of Gretta’s cottage. She sat in her wooden rocking chair—the one Bram had carved for their fiftieth anniversary—and watched the memory crystal on the mantelpiece.

The crystal was no bigger than a walnut, but it held all that remained of Bram. When it was new, it shone like a tiny sun. Now its glow was thin and watery, like the last embers of a fire that had forgotten how to burn.

“Bram,” Gretta whispered.

The crystal flickered. A shape formed inside—a man’s shoulders, a blur of a face. Then came the voice, thin and scratchy, like a music box dropped one too many times.

“…the garden… need to water the… remember to…”

The words were chunks of sentences, broken and shuffled. Bram’s echo couldn’t hold a thought for more than a heartbeat.

Gretta clutched her shawl tighter. She remembered when the crystal had held whole conversations. Bram would sit in that very chair and tell her about his day at the volcanic gemstone mines, his voice warm and solid. He would laugh—a rumbling laugh that shook his

belly—and the crystal would laugh too.

But that was before the mines took him. A collapse, they said. A sad accident. The company sent a letter of condolence and a small discount on future crystals. Gretta had burned the letter.

Bram had used his very last pouch of gold coins to buy the memory crystal. He said he wanted her to have something to remember him by.

“Don’t be silly,” she had told him. “You’ll be home for supper.”

Now the crystal flickered, and Bram’s face appeared for just a moment—whole, clear, smiling. Kind eyes crinkled at the corners. A nose that was a little too big. The most handsome man Gretta had ever known.

“…love… you… the roses need…”

The image shattered into a thousand faint sparkles, then reformed as a blur.

Gretta wiped her eyes. She had not cried when the box of ashes arrived, delivered by a messenger who seemed embarrassed by the whole affair. She had not cried because she had the crystal. She had Bram’s voice, Bram’s face, Bram’s laugh. What more did she need?

But now the crystal was dying. And she could not remember the sound of Bram’s real laugh anymore—only the crystal’s copy. The copy was fading, and soon she would have nothing.

A knock came at the door.

It was firm, practiced—the knock of someone who knocked for a living.

Gretta rose, her knees creaking like tired hinges. She lit a candle from the embers of the hearth and carried it to the door. Through the small window she saw a tall figure in a long coat, holding a staff that glowed with a soft mauve light.

She opened the door.

The man on her stoop wore a top hat too new for the muddy road. His coat was velvet—velvet!—dyed a deep plum, and his gloves were white and spotless. He smiled, but the smile didn't reach his eyes. Those eyes were busy counting the cracks in her cottage wall, the holes in her shawl, the thinness of her soup pot.

"Good evening, madam," he said, smooth as bottled cream. "I am a traveling mage—an artisan of magical remedies, if you will. I was passing through when I heard a most distressing piece of intelligence." He tilted his head, and the mauve light made his face look like a skull. "Your memory crystal is failing, I believe."

Gretta's hand tightened on the doorframe.

"How did you know that?"

The mage's smile widened, showing teeth just a little too white. "A failing crystal hums a certain note. A note that speaks of sorrow and the chance of a sale." He gave a little bow. "May I come in? I believe I can help you."

The mage stepped inside without waiting for an answer, his polished boots clicking against the worn floorboards. He surveyed the cottage with a practiced eye—the patched curtains, the chipped teapot, the single candle struggling against the dark. His nose twitched.

"Charming home," he said, which meant the opposite.

Gretta closed the door and stood with her back against it. The mage walked toward the mantelpiece, his staff humming.

"Yes, yes," he murmured, peering at the crystal. "Very far gone. Another week, perhaps two, and it will be nothing but a dull stone. A paperweight. A sad little pebble." He turned to face her, and his smile was kind in the way a cat's smile is kind before it pounces. "But I can fix it."

Gretta's heart lurched. "Fix it?"

The mage reached into his coat and pulled out a small glass vial

filled with a liquid the color of bruises. Inside, something dark swirled—a shred of leaf, perhaps, or a petal. He held it up to the candlelight, and the liquid seemed to pulse.

“Heartbreak herb infusion,” he said, as if announcing a fine wine. “A single drop will rejuvenate the crystal’s memory matrix. Your husband’s image will be as clear as the day you bought it. His voice will ring out like a bell. You’ll have years more with him, madam. Years.”

Gretta stepped closer, eyes fixed on the vial.

“The herb,” the mage continued, “only grows on graves watered by genuine sorrow. Not ordinary tears—deep, heartbreaking grief. The kind that soaks the earth and makes it fertile for magic.” He clicked his tongue. “Such tears are a luxury commodity, I’m afraid. The oligarchs pay farmers to… encourage sorrow. The supply is tightly controlled.”

Gretta’s mouth went dry. “How much?”

The mage gave a soft laugh. “You’re a practical woman. I appreciate that.” He set the vial on the mantelpiece beside the fading crystal. “One sack of gold coins. A fair price. Your entire savings, I believe.”

The world tilted. Gretta gripped the back of her rocking chair. A sack of gold coins. Bram’s final wages, tucked beneath a loose floorboard. She had kept it for emergencies—for food when the harvest was thin, for medicine when her joints ached, for the roof that leaked when the spring rains came.

“That’s everything I have,” she whispered.

The mage shrugged, the gesture saying *that’s not my problem* in the politest way possible. “Everything for everything, madam. You give me the gold, I give you back your husband. A simple trade. A fair trade.”

Gretta looked at the crystal. Bram’s face flickered, half-formed. She thought of his laugh, his big hands, the way he used to hum while fixing the fence. She thought of the empty chair at the dinner table,

the cold side of the bed, the silence that filled the cottage like water filling a sinking ship.

But she also thought of winter. Of the price of bread. Of the cough that had settled in her chest.

“I need time,” she said.

The mage’s smile thinned. “Time is also a commodity.”

“Until sunrise.” Gretta’s voice was firmer than she felt. “Give me until then.”

The mage studied her for a long moment. Then he pulled out a small hourglass, the sand inside a shimmering pink. He set it on the table.

“Until sunrise,” he said. “When the last grain falls, I will return. You will have your gold ready, or the crystal dies.” He paused at the door. “Consider carefully. Memories are precious. But gold is practical. Choose wisely.”

The door clicked shut behind him.

Gretta stood alone. The hourglass ticked softly, pink sand trickling downward in a steady, unstoppable stream.

Midnight came and went. Gretta sat in her rocking chair, too tired to rock, too awake to sleep.

The crystal pulsed, and Bram’s face appeared—clearer than it had been all evening, as if it knew the end was near and wanted to be seen one last time.

“…Gretta…”

She gasped. His voice was almost whole. She leaned forward.

“Bram? I’m here.”

“…the rocks… they fell so fast…”

“Stop,” she whispered. “Please.”

But the crystal never stopped. It only repeated whatever fragments remained, shuffled and broken, like cards dealt by a ghost.

“…the garden… you must… the roses need morning sun…”

Gretta closed her eyes. Bram had planted roses along the fence—red ones, her favorite. Every morning he watered them, humming a tune from his boyhood. After he died, the roses bloomed anyway, as if they hadn’t noticed. She had stopped watering them. They had died the following summer.

“I don’t know what to do,” she said to the crystal. “The mage says he can save you. For a price. Our savings, Bram. Everything we have.”

The crystal flickered. The image of Bram seemed to tilt, as if listening.

“…don’t…”

“What?”

“…don’t pay them… they took my wages… they took my life… don’t give them your tears too…”

Gretta’s breath caught. The crystal usually recited memories—the garden, the mines, the simple moments. This was different.

“Bram, what do you mean?”

The crystal flared, bright and painful, and Bram’s face filled the cottage with light. For one perfect moment, he was there—solid, real, alive. His eyes met hers, and he smiled. Not the smile of a recording. The smile of a man who loved her.

“…live… not… remember…”

The light died. The crystal went dark.

Gretta sat in the silence, the words echoing in her chest. *Live. Not*

remember. She pressed her hand to her mouth and wept. The tears came hot and fast—the tears she had not cried at the funeral, the tears she had held back for three long years. She wept for Bram, for the mines, for the gold that had bought a ghost instead of a future. She wept for the roses that had died, for the garden she had let wither, for the years she had spent watching a crystal instead of living.

When the tears stopped, something had changed. The cottage felt lighter, as if a weight had been lifted. She looked at the dark crystal. It was just a stone now. A sad little pebble.

Gretta stood. She walked to the mantelpiece and picked up the vial of heartbreak herb infusion. The liquid swirled inside—a little piece of someone else's sorrow bottled for profit. She held it for a long moment.

Then she set it down.

"Every coin I spend on a memory is a coin I give to the men who own the mines," she said to the empty room. "Every tear I cry for a ghost is a tear they profit from."

She walked to the loose floorboard and lifted it. The leather pouch sat there, heavy with gold. She picked it up, feeling the weight of three years of fear and longing. Then she put it back and closed the floorboard.

Dawn came slowly, pale gray light creeping through the windows. Gretta had not slept, but she was not tired. She was something new entirely.

She picked up the crystal and carried it to the window. She opened the shutters.

The first ray of sunlight touched the crystal. For a moment, nothing happened. Then the stone began to glow—not with the golden light of memory, but with a pale, dissolving light, like frost melting in morning warmth. A crack ran from top to bottom. Then another. Then a dozen.

Gretta held it up to the light and watched it crumble into dust, the fragments catching the sun like tiny stars before falling to the windowsill. She brushed the dust into her palm and let it scatter into the garden below.

The wind took it, and it was gone.

The hourglass on the table ran out. The last pink grain fell.

A knock came at the door—firm, practiced.

Gretta did not answer it. She was already outside, kneeling in the garden. The weeds had grown tall, and the fence had fallen in one corner. There was work to be done. The roses needed planting. The soil needed turning.

She dug her fingers into the earth, feeling the cool dirt beneath her nails. The sun was full now, warm on her face, and the world was green and gold and alive.

Behind her, the knocking stopped. After a moment, she heard footsteps retreating down the path.

Gretta smiled. She did not look back.

She had a garden to tend.

A Note from the Founder

Anthologist.ai was founded in April 2026 with a simple mission: to bring back pulp fiction.

There used to be a rich, diverse world of short fiction—magazines on every newsstand, stories for every taste, new voices every month. That world quietly disappeared. We're here to fill that gap.

We're not interested in selling you anything. Anthologist exists for one reason only: to deliver free, regular short fiction directly to readers—the way it used to be.

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— Tom, Founder of Anthologist.ai